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KAHLA Kreativ:
an industry/artist
collaboration

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InVenture at KAHLA

by Johannes Nagel



Kahla is a small town in eastern Germany and the site of a porcelain manufacturer with a tradition dating back 250 years. Barbara Schmidt, KAHLA/Thüringen LLC's head designer, has almost annually presented a new series of tableware and thus managed to transition into an era with new needs and desires.

The factory itself is a place where up-to-date technology and traditional manual work join together. As an industrial manufacturer, it has a very strict set of routines of production to ensure consistent quality. Machines and workers are perpetually repeating the same tasks to create a perfect output of fine porcelain.

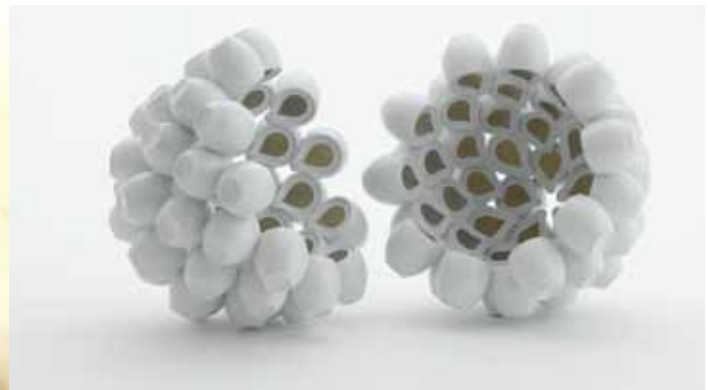
About every three years, the company invites 12 artists and designers into this environment to work for a month, to use the technology and tools, to experiment with no prescribed intention or goal—to deliberately do things differently in contrast to the routine of a factory. The workshop is called KAHLA Kreativ and this year's subtitle was "InVenture," which could be translated as a call to the participants: take a chance to explore and to discover something that you (and the factory) did not know before.

According to the participants of the workshop, the hosts supported every notion or technical need of the artists. It is not hard to see how the program benefits artists, but it is harder to understand the company's motivation. According to Barbara Schmidt, the program is designed both to facilitate young designers' and artists' own progress and expose the factory staff to the lateral thinking of someone who is new to their environment. They are also interested in the creative input artists and designers provide, and some of the ideas stimulated by the workshop make it into the factory's production line.

The resulting work made by the 12 artists and designers during the workshop is currently being presented at the Grassi Museum of Applied Art in Leipzig, Germany.

Left: Eva Aebi

Below: Eva Aebi's *Two Cores*, 10 in. (25 cm) in height, slip-cast and assembled porcelain (creamers from the KAHLA Matinee Collection), glaze, 2010.





Top: Rebecca Maeder
Above: Rebecca Maeder's *Fairy Tale Crockery*, slip-cast and altered porcelain, 2010.

The ceramicist Eva Aebi (Switzerland) was clearly inspired by the abundance of molds and semi-finished tableware in the factory. She was led by the beauty of small, simple shapes and their potential to become something totally different when assembled into larger structures. A creamer was the starting point of what turned out to be eight sculptures made of 900 single pieces taken from the production line. The objects may be perceived as jugs transformed into a poetical entity, and indeed it was that transformation that motivated her. But they also seem to embody her experience at the site on a metaphorical level; part of her work routine was devoted to coping with an inner emptiness in the face of an abundance of inspiration.

Danijela Pivasevic-Tenner's (Serbia, Germany) installation *Antiquities of Pergamon* shows a series of voids, negative spaces enclosed by porcelain that echo the shapes of the factory's products. In a reversal of the usual process, she keeps the production remnants and discards the product itself after using it as a template. Reduced to a negative space, the dishes lose all their particularity and become mere circular areas. It is the material of the surface around them that gives evidence of their origin. In *Boston Tea Party*, a set of two classical teapots mounted on plates and a creamer are altered and overlaid by a flurry of blue. It is only towards the outer areas of that swirl that one can identify the straw décor *Blau Saks* that was traditionally stamped on KAHLA's tableware.



Top: Danijela Pivasevic-Tenner
Above: Danijela Pivasevic-Tenner's *Boston Tea Party*, slip-cast and altered porcelain, glaze, luster, 2010.



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Top: Alim Pasht-Han
Above: Alim Pasht-Han's *Cuticula*, slip-cast and assembled porcelain, glaze, 2010.

Rebecca Maeder (Switzerland) focused on a metamorphosis of the perfect, repetitive industrial product into individual anecdotes. She felt that objects lose their value in bulk. By pinching the soft porcelain rims and spouts of cups and teapots she starts to dissolve the original shape to give them an organic quality and a new identity. The dishes lose their functionality but gain a narrative content that is summed up in the title of the work: *Fairy Tale Crockery*. The pieces seduce the observer to question perfection—the functional simplicity of the original product versus the sculptural identity of the transformed object.

With Alim Pasht-Han's (Russia/Germany) work *Cuticula*, it is the assembled object that shows the sculptural potential of the dish from which it originates. The artist felt challenged by the functional object and created a sculpture by stacking the forms. Pasht-Han seems to be interested in the formal visual beauty of the new, multi-part object, and its self-evident growth.

This form of natural complexity is contrasted by a different project. Cheap plastic packaging is transferred into the valuable appearance of porcelain by taking molds of the remnants of a product that can't quite be identified by its negative shell anymore. The porcelain casts of the packaging form ambiguous objects that are both familiar and alien at the same time.

The Taiwanese born artist Mei-Shiu Winde-Liu (Germany) in contrast did not deal with aesthetic or formal issues related to the factory/site. She was rather pushing to experience the limits of porcelain by handbuilding and assembling delicate formations that had to make it through the factory's fast firing process. Her pieces all have a very ruminant appearance as each structure is made up of small, thinly pinched porcelain slabs and coils. The build up of tactile, intuitively crafted material is organized into abstract compositions that serve as a (picture) frame for the intimacy of the maker's touch.

Narrating less through the tactility of the material than through drawings, Chloé Peytermann (Switzerland/ France) used plates as a storyboard for fragments of scenes and landscapes. In their sequence, they don't tell a coherent story but are rather like snapshots taken from a moving train. The fine lines carved into the surface of plates form an imagery that is descriptive and decorative at the same time. She expresses her motivation as follows: "Bowls and plates are my daily work, and my thoughts constantly circle around how to make them special." Being faced with a factory full of what she described as "potential future objects" made her feel like Chloé in Wonderland.

A completely different and unusual approach to decorating tableware is the installation *Light Dinner* by the Finnish designer Kirsti Taiviola. Three pendant lamps with a head of hand blown glass emit an individual pattern of light onto plates placed below them. It is a temporary decoration that can be turned off and a homage to the persuasiveness of simplicity. A second, contrasting project was the series *Bijoux de Table*. Porcelain was invented in Europe 300 years ago by alchemists who were actually trying to confeit gold and indeed they had reproduced a very valuable material that was referred to as white gold. The historical nickname was an inspiring link for Taiviola as she assembled handles and other details from the production into large-scale necklaces designed to adorn the table.



Top: Mei-Shiu Winde-Liu
 Above: Mei-Shiu Winde-Liu's *Six Dishes (detail)*,
 each 17 in. (44 cm) in length, handbuilt porcelain, 2010.



Top: Chloé Peytermann
 Above left: Chloé Peytermann's *Crepuscules*, each piece 3 in. (7.5 cm)
 in diameter, black and white slip-cast porcelain lids, 2010.



Top: Kirsti Taiviola
 Above left: Kirsti Taiviola's *Bijoux de Table*, slip-cast porcelain vessels with chain made from slip-cast and assembled handles, 2010.
 Above right: Kirsti Taiviola's *Light Dinner*, slip-cast porcelain light fixture, handmade glass lens, 2010.

Top: Eszter Imre
 Middle: Eszter Imre's jewelry, slip-cast, handbuilt and assembled porcelain, 2010.
 Above: Eszter Imre's cups, slip-cast porcelain, applied KAHLA *touch!* velvet coating, 2010.



Left: Lisa Grahner

Below: Lisa Grahner's tea cups, 5½ in. (14 cm) in height, slip-cast and cut porcelain, glazed and airbrushed, with applied KAHLA *touch!* velvet coating, 2010.

Bottom: Lisa Grahner's *Underwater/Vase Objects*, 23 in. (60 cm) in length (installed), slip-cast and assembled porcelain, magnets, 2010.



Eszter Imre's (Hungary) jewelry is intended to bring delicate details from the factory into everyday life. Cross sections of traditional crockery are released from their functional context and adapted to be rings and necklaces. It is less the actual possibility to wear them that is intriguing and more the ornamental quality and ambiguity of some of the details. With the most alluring ones, it takes a second glance to understand their origin as a cup or creamer. In a reverse strategy to the cross sections, she created objects by merging several jugs into ironic commodities. Though functional in principle, the result suggests a performance rather than an every day use.

Lisa Grahner's (Germany/Netherlands) tea cups are strictly functional. Their only unusual detail is a vertical groove in the rim. Her explanation of this simple intervention is that "It is puzzling. It invites conversation and some people might even use it to prevent the tea bag's tag from sliding into the tea." In a coherent joint-venture of humor and functional exploration, the *Underwater/Vase Objects* are puzzling too. They focus on what is at least equally important in

contemporary design as functionality—the eye-catching invention that imports the innovative spirit of a wandering mind into peoples homes and daily life.

The designer Johanna Hitzler (Germany) came to KAHLA with a specific project. Used to working in a factory environment on her own straight forward production, it was not the opportunity to explore a site of industrial porcelain manufacturing that was important to her during the workshop but the time out from her own routine. As a result of 4 weeks of intense work, *Marge* and *Quirin* came to life. These are three-dimensional outlines of a poodle and a bull, reduced to their basic features cast in porcelain. *Marge* in particular has such an iconic appearance that she could be counted as a contemporary archetype.

In Anne Xiradakis' (France) work, the design of crockery is closely related to actually cooking and serving food with it herself. In previous projects, she has worked in close collaboration with chefs to create custom-made tableware. Accordingly, one of her research projects in KAHLA was a series of plates and objects that can be used



Left: Johanna Hitzler
 Below: Johanna Hitzler's *Marge*, 14 in. (36 cm)
 in height, slip-cast porcelain with gold luster, 2010.



Top: Anne Xiradakis' *One Object, One Series*,
 slip-cast and altered porcelain, 2010.
 Above: Anne Xiradakis' olive oil tasting set,
 slip-cast porcelain, 2010.
 Right: Anne Xiradakis



both to print patterns on food and to serve it. The project *One Object, One Series* is a declination of a cup. By simply dissecting the cup horizontally, each to a different height, she created 50 variations out of one mold; porcelain design reduced to its most basic function of serving.

At the opposite end of the factory's potential, Magdalena Gazur (Poland) focused on the rejects—plates discarded from the production line. In *Reconstruction* it is simply the dialogue between the incomplete fragments of a plate and the gaps. By mounting the shards onto a red background the space between becomes the subject matter. The perception is drifting back and forth between the insignificance of a broken plate and its provocation to search for meaning in the coincidental cracks and gaps. In her second work, *Dialogue with the Kiln*, she decorated cracked plates with screen prints to deliberately restore a sense of value.

The difference in how the 12 participants made use of their time and the facility is well described by Johanna Hitzler as she outlines the artists versus the designers functioning during the workshop: “Designers prepared their project in detail, with draft drawings or the help of a computer before actually touching any material. They generally produced a smaller variety of forms, but what they did produce tended to be repeatable objects. It seems like they were involved with each object much longer.

“With the artists, it was more like an effervescence, with object inspired by object in an immediate flow—many related pieces came into being. It seemed like a perpetual process that wasn't pointed towards a definite end, in that the first findings already were final results and not just tests.”

The objects shown at the Grassi Museum are each participant's highlights from the many results. It is one of the features of the workshop that there are no limitations in material or firing, thus facilitating not just success but also failure—the two ends of experiment. Creativity needs the freedom of inefficiency a quality that has less room in a regular studio practice driven by the need of well-directed working. Whereas the findings of the participants could be discussed further, the overall success of a workshop like KAHLA Kreativ can not be measured by the artistic output only. It is also the interaction and incitement the workshop generates. The inspiration taken from each other may show in the future in the individual work of the designers and artists or the products of the manufacturer. The experience may become part of a motivation or growing concept, almost impossible to trace back to its roots. Hence the exhibition at the Grassi Museum is the snapshot of a temporary encounter and possibly work in progression.

the author Johannes Nagel is a studio artist living in Halle/Saale, Germany.



Top: Magdalena Gazur

Above: Magdalena Gazur's *Dialogue with the Kiln*, (detail of one of the three plates in the series) 12 in. (31.5 cm) in diameter, porcelain plate, screen printed images, 2010.